

The Way Home

Aims

- To focus students on the special features of short stories.
- To encourage the study of description and dialogue in short stories, and to allow students to practise writing skills.
- To stimulate students to read the book.

- Put the following quote on the board or overhead:
'A short story usually shows one incident in the life of a person. That one event illustrates a universal truth about that person or life in general.' Ask students to comment on the quote. Do they agree with it? Would they add anything?
- Ask students if they can remember any short story they have read. If so, did it fit the description above? Do they like short stories? Why/why not? Do they have a favourite short story? Ask them what makes a short story effective. Elicit ideas to the board.
- Ask them to compare their ideas with the list A Good Short Story (next page). Do they agree with the points? Do they want to add anything, or take anything away?
- Introduce *The Way Home* and tell students that there is a common thread to all the stories. Ask them to read the Blurb (next page) and say what the theme is (travel, journeys).
- Tell the students that the stories are set in different countries. Focus the students on point **f** in the list, 'a strong sense of place'. Ask them to read Extracts 1–4 from the stories in the collection *The Way Home* and discuss in groups:
 - Which places do they describe?
 - Do the extracts convey a strong sense of place?
 - What is it that makes them effective, or not?

Possible points:

Extract 1 Point out how the heat is conveyed, the use of the railway to illustrate the rural sleepiness of Italy, its essentially peasant nature.

Extract 2 Focus on the colours, the heat, the sound of the engine in the silence of the desert.

Extract 3 Just a few points give you the feel of the place – the neon sign, the colours, the cactus plants. Focusing on the people who stayed there also adds to its feel.

Extract 4 There is a focus on the relationship between Alex and the landscape. We see the landscape unfold through her eyes as she goes up the moor.

- Ask students to think about a place they know well and to make some notes about it. It can be somewhere local or another place they have visited. Ask them to write a short description, making the place sound interesting for the reader. They can try some of the techniques used above.

- Put students into pairs and ask them to swap descriptions. They read and give each other feedback. Re-pair students two or three times and repeat.
- Refer back to point **b** in the list A Good Short Story. Point out/elicite that one way of showing pivotal events in stories is through dialogue. Start a discussion about what good dialogue is. Ask students to read the dialogues in Extracts 5 and 6. What is the relationship between the characters in each extract? What does the dialogue show about their relationship?

Possible points:

Extract 5 Abi and Ray are a married couple, or girlfriend and boyfriend. They are in completely different moods and their conversation shows it. They are talking across each other rather than to each other. She is excited and he is tired. This perhaps shows something about their relationship.

Extract 6 Gretzky and Lisa (the narrator) are both reporters on their way to report on an execution. He is the hardened hack and she is the junior. It's obvious from the extract that they have different points of view. She uses sarcasm to disagree with him – 'Oh good, I like clean' – and he uses 'kid', possibly to put her down.

- Ask students what they think might happen in the six stories.
- Ask students to look at the titles of the short stories in *The Way Home*, together with the settings. Which one would they like to read?

The Way Home (set in New York, USA but mostly in the north

of England)

The Nature of Truth (set in Italy)

Just the Facts (set in Texas, USA)

Water in the Desert (set in New Mexico and Colorado, USA)

The Knowledge (set in London, UK)

Fifteen Hundred Words (set in Vancouver, Canada)

North Sea Eyes (set in The Hague, Holland)

End Point (set in Texas, USA)

- If you have the books, students can start reading, each starting with the story they want to read most.

Optional extra: This is a listening and dialogue writing exercise which can be done for homework. Ask students to find a place in which to listen to people talking; this can be their home, a coffee shop, a bus stop. They should listen to people talking to one another for five minutes. Did they use complete sentences or fragments of sentences? What was their meaning and intent? Was there emotion behind what was said? What was the relationship of the speakers? Did the speakers use gestures? Ask students to try to capture the conversation on paper. When they come back to class they can read each others' dialogues or, better still, read them out as dialogue.

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A Good Short Story

- a Has a clear theme. What is the story about? That doesn't mean the plot line, the sequence of events or the character's actions. It means the underlying message or statement behind the words.
- b Covers a very short time span. It may be one single event that proves pivotal in the life of the character, and that event will illustrate the theme.
- c Doesn't have too many characters. Each new character will bring a new dimension to the story, and for an effective short story too many diverse dimensions (or directions) will dilute the theme. It should have only enough characters to effectively illustrate the theme.
- d Makes every word count. There is no room for unnecessary expansion in a short story. If each word is not working towards putting across the theme, then it has to be deleted.
- e Has focus. The best stories are the ones that follow a narrow subject line. What is the point of the story? Its point is its theme. It's tempting to digress, but in a short story you have to follow the straight and narrow otherwise you end up with either a novel beginning or just a collection of ideas.
- f Conveys a strong sense of place.

Blurb

Eight journeys which change lives forever – a New York fashion buyer returns to her English home, a successful author meets an old friend, a reporter travels to an execution, a lorry driver gives an escaped prisoner a lift, a taxi driver picks up 'Bruce Lee', a bus ride home changes a film writer's life and work, a man's love for a tram driver leads him to follow her, and four strangers meet at a motel for the first and last time.

Extract 1

(from *The Nature of Truth*)

It was 8.30 on an early May morning, and Annie Sanderson was at Rome's Termini station, ticket in hand, waiting for her train to Bologna.

Even so early in the morning, it was already hot; Annie could feel the sweat running down the back of her neck. It was going to be another day like yesterday, she thought, when she had given a talk at a literature conference. The room, in the Palazzo Livio, had been uncomfortably sticky. Her audience, mostly writers and professors from the English literature department of the university, had sweated through the hour and a half. Her talk, on her new novel, *The Nature of Truth*, had been well received, though she wondered how they had been able to concentrate for so long in that heat. She herself had drunk two whole jugs of water.

In spite of the heat, it was wonderful to be back in Italy. Annie looked down at the grass and the little clumps of pink and yellow flowers beside the railway line and smiled. It looked like some sleepy rural village station instead of the capital city's main railway station. She loved this country; it was full of these charming contrasts.

Extract 2

(from *Water in the Desert*)

The desert was dark pink, the sky was baby blue; the whole thing looked good enough to eat. The road from Santa Fe made its way like a black snake through the red and pink landscape. Through the hot air the tall man standing at the side of the road could see the sharp mountain peaks of the Rockies in the distance.

At last a truck came. The first thing he heard was the distant sound of an engine. Sweetest sound in the whole world when you've been out in the desert sun for two hours and you're beginning to think you might die there. Real sweet. He blinked at the road and looked ahead, listening. Yeah, it was a truck alright.

He ran up through the bushes at the side of the road and stood right there staring into the distance, so that he could see the truck as soon it came into view. Then he saw it, a bright piece of silver, with sunlight bouncing off it in all directions. A great silver insect crawling across the stillness of the desert floor of New Mexico.

Extract 3

(from *End Point*)

There is no doubt that the Lone Star Motel in Austin, Texas is different. It seems to have more going for it than a regular motel. The sign outside it, pointing upwards, flashes: 'So close yet so far out.' It looks like the kind of place where Elvis Presley had parties in the 1950s. The blues singer Janis Joplin had probably stayed there. There is more than a hint of guilty pleasure about it. The rooms are pink and blue and the air conditioning is noisy but efficient. The swimming pool has cactus plants around it.

It is a place where anything might happen.

Extract 4

(from *The Way Home*)

She drove to the lake that lay at the foot of the moor. Leaving the little car in the car park, she put on her walking boots and set off up the steep path that led from the shore to the top of the moor. It was such a luxury, she thought, just being able to walk in the countryside. But it was hard going; the small stones that covered the path were loose and slippery. In places on the path there was thick mud from the rain a few nights ago and she had to go back and find another way up to the top. There were only a few other walkers out that early November day and they were far away from her on the other side of the moor. The air was cold and there were patches of snow on the hills. As she made her way slowly up the hillside, the world became a gentler, quieter place, until the only sound she could hear was of her own heavy breathing.

She walked on, enveloped by moor now, the lake and the rest of the valley hidden from view. The moor held her safe in its arms and she felt again her old love of this beautiful landscape. 'My place,' she thought. The hills could be bare and wild, but they offered a kind of comfort to her because she knew them so well. She had been away for so long, but still they were part of her. She knew their secret places.

Finally the moor began to open out, unfolding its arms and setting her free. Now she had a view of part of the lake, grey-green and silent in the valley, clear like a mirror. She stopped and looked down, enjoying the silence that lay across the valley and the sound of blood beating in her ears.

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Extract 5

(from *Fifteen Hundred Words*)

The clean white skytrain arrived at the station. Abi got on and looked for Ray. She found him right at the end of the train . . . She kissed him lightly on the cheek. 'Have a good day?'

'Oh, it was all right, I suppose,' he said, staring blankly ahead. 'Just too much work. The boss has just signed another contract. And I've got to go to Toronto next week.' Ray's boss was always sending Ray to Toronto or Montreal on business.

'Oh really?' said Abi. 'Toronto . . .' The excitement of her film class still burned inside her.

There was a silence for a few moments.

'Main Street, Science World,' came the automated voice. The train slowed down into the station.

'We saw a fantastic film tonight,' said Abi, as the train moved out of the station.

'Oh yeah? God, I'm hungry.'

'Japanese. *Tokyo Story*.'

'Didn't have time for lunch today.'

'It's really exciting,' said Abi. 'I mean, what you can do with film.'

'Starving.'

'I mean, I know that Shakespeare said action is eloquence; that it speaks for itself, and it's true because action is important, but it doesn't have to be extreme action. I mean, if you think about it . . .'

'Broadway, Commercial Drive,' said the automated voice.

Abi and Ray stood up automatically. They walked down the platform and down the steps to the bus stop.

'I hate this bus. It's always late,' Ray said as they waited for bus twenty in the cold.

Extract 6

(From *Just the Facts*)

Gretzky arrived back from the bathroom, still adjusting the belt of his trousers. 'What ya reading?' he asked, peering at the information sheet. 'Ah yeah . . . but you're lucky, kid. It's so much cleaner than when they used to kill 'em with an electric shock.'

'Oh good,' I said. 'I like clean.'

'Not that I ever saw anyone die from an electric shock,' Gretzky went on, ignoring the comment. 'It was before my time. But you can only imagine.'

I tried not to imagine. It was bad enough thinking about the lethal injection. 'So what's it like seeing a man tied to a bed and killed, just ten feet away from you?' I asked Gretzky.

'Well,' he said, settling himself behind the steering wheel and putting on his seat belt, 'it's like a ceremony, kid. It's hard to explain. It's not really very emotional. You'll be fine.'

'Anyway,' he went on, 'it's not killing, kid. It's *execution*. Killing is what *he* did, this Pearson.'

Oh yeah. Sometimes I found it hard to see the difference.

'Isn't killing always killing?' I asked Gretzky. At times I couldn't help myself.

'Well now, kid,' Gretzky said, 'that's way too philosophical. The guy's gone out and killed a man. No one made him do it; he has to take responsibility for that.'